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BYSIEWICZ, BLUMENTHAL: V.A. SECRETARY PEAKE SAYS “NO” TO VOTER EDUCATION & REGISTRATION

SECRETARY OF THE STATE AND ATTORNEY GENERAL EXPRESS OUTRAGE;
V.A. EXTENDS BAN TO VOTER EDUCATION

HARTFORD: Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz and Attorney General Richard Blumenthal announced today, July 18, 2008, that the United States Department of Veterans Affairs has rejected their request to allow Secretary Bysiewicz to conduct voter registration drives and their expanded the ban to voter education in Connecticut's veterans' hospitals.

“V.A. Secretary Peake has made it very clear: voter registration drives and voter education are off limits for our countries wounded warriors,” said Bysiewicz. “This is an affront to me as the chief elections official in this state; it is an affront to people with disabilities and an affront to veterans who have put their lives on the line for us. If this is the agency whose mission is to advocate for veterans, we are in serious trouble.”

In a letter dated July 15, 2008 Secretary Peake stated the only people who can register patients to vote are officially certified volunteers. However, the fine print of the volunteer forms states that volunteers can only register veterans at federal run facilities who specifically request the help. Furthermore, the volunteer form states that the volunteers may not encourage the V.A. patients to participate in the political process through activities such as voting.

“The VA's refusal to permit non-partisan voter registration drives and voting machine demonstrations is blatantly illegal -- mocking clear constitutional rights, and disrespecting our veterans, said Attorney General Blumenthal. “The VA's convoluted constraints and restrictions on registration and complete ban on voter education plainly

violate democratic rights -- the very rights that these veterans fought and sacrificed to preserve and protect. Instead of clear straight answers, the VA has given us disingenuous doubletalk and bureaucratic gobbledygook -- designed to discourage and delay voter registration.”

“To respect constitutional rights, the VA should go back to boot camp. Where veterans deserve a clear path to the voting booth, the VA has laid a maze and minefield of regulatory barricades and booby traps.”

“Our next step is a final demand to the VA, which we are sending by letter today: allow legally required non-partisan voter registration drives, including both in-patients and out-patients, staff and visitors; permit voter education and demonstration of the new machines; lift unreasonable and restrictive restraints on access. If these demands are unmet by August 1, we will take appropriate action to fight for these veterans rights -- just as they fought for ours -- including potential action in court.”

“Singularly lacking in the VA’s action are two traits distinguished by our military leadership: common sense and conscience. Veterans don’t need a VA blitz -- they need and deserve respect and legal rights.”

On July 11th Secretary Bysiewicz and Washing State Secretary of State Sam Reed launched a bi-partisan effort among Secretaries of the State to over turn a V.A. directive prohibiting staff from participating in voter registration drives for patients and residents of hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and homeless shelters administered by the federal Veterans Administration.

In their letter to V.A. Secretary James Peake, Bysiewicz and Reed wrote, “As a practical matter, voter registration drives have historically been a critical outreach tool for veterans in facilities to ensure that they get the opportunity to register to vote. Many veterans simply are not able to get out on their own, rendering registration much more difficult. Likewise, the longstanding practice of allowing facility employees to assist veterans in registering to vote has provided valuable assistance to veterans in need.”

A bipartisan coalition of 20 Secretaries of State representing millions of voters nationwide signed onto the letter, representing states such as Ohio, Minnesota, Vermont, Montana, Connecticut, Idaho, Rhode Island, North Carolina, New Hampshire, West Virginia, Maine, Kansas, Kentucky, Oregon, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Missouri, Washington State, and the District of Columbia.

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, in a formal legal opinion released July 11th, said, “In my view, this directive should be withdrawn and revised immediately by the DVA (Department of Veterans Affairs) because it is flawed and unfounded in law and fatally unfair in its restraint on veterans’ rights. The DVA directive cited by officials as a reason to constrain voting registration or education is confusing and misleading. Relying on the Hatch Act to limit such efforts is disingenuous and even deceptive. It may chill and discourage legitimate exercise of rights. It is unfounded legally and unjustified as policy. Its main effect is to inhibit veteran voting.”

On July 3rd Secretary Bysiewicz and Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, wrote to Secretary of Veterans Affairs James B. Peake to request that Secretary Bysiewicz and elections officials be granted access to the facilities for the purposes of

distributing voter registration materials and instructing residents on the use of newly-implemented voting machines.

“The Secretary of the State was recently blocked from access by local Veterans Health Administration (VHA) officials, who have subsequently stated that the request remains under review,” wrote Blumenthal and Bysiewicz. “We seek your timely assurance within the next 10 days that the Secretary’s request and other similar requests by state and local election officials will be granted. Also, as this episode demonstrates, the VHA must clarify its policy to ensure that election officials across the country be permitted to assist our nation’s heroes in exercising the very democratic rights that they have sacrificed so much to preserve.”

“The Directive should not be construed to bar nonpartisan voter registration and education activities conducted by state and local election officials in furtherance of their official duties, which pose no significant risk of partisanship, disruption or violation of the Hatch Act,” Blumenthal and Bysiewicz continued. “To prohibit such access would be detrimental to both veterans and the state and local election officials who seek to assist them, while serving no valid institutional objectives of the VHA.”

“We respectfully request that you instruct officials with responsibility for the administration of VHA facilities located in Connecticut that they immediately grant the Secretary’s request so that she may provide assistance to veterans without further delay.”

On June 30th, Secretary Bysiewicz was joined by Attorney General Blumenthal, veterans and veterans’ advocates at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in West Haven to blast the policy, register veterans to vote, and distribute information on the state’s new voting machines at the facility. Secretary Bysiewicz was able to register 10 veterans to vote outside the facility Monday afternoon.